



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE DUMB-SHOW IN *HAMLET*

In a delightfully ingenious and thoroughly unconvincing paper in the *Modern Language Review* for October, 1917, Dr. W. W. Greg contends that "Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears," for if he had done so he would have taken alarm at the representation of this action in the dumb-show without waiting for a second representation of it in the spoken play; consequently, that "the Ghost's story was not a revelation, but a mere figment of Hamlet's brain"; that as Hamlet was already familiar with *The Murder of Gonzago*, it was from that play that his fevered imagination supplied the incident, and hence we have the amazing coincidence of the exactly similar story.¹

In answer to all this, Mr. J. Dover Wilson, in the April number of the same journal, employs and amplifies the familiar explanation that Claudius did not see the dumb-show; it seems that he was speaking aside with the Queen and Polonius, as he himself clearly proves by asking Hamlet, while the play itself is in progress, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" As Ophelia had already divined, the dumb-show *is* the argument. Dr. Greg had dismissed this explanation, first proposed by Halliwell, as wholly unwarranted; and even if it is not, we must admit that it does somewhat blur and confuse the picture to have Claudius too obviously and too conveniently happen to play the part of a box occupant at the Metropolitan Opera House during this crucial moment.

Whatever difficulty there is in the way of this explanation *could* be overcome by supposing that the throne chairs of the King and Queen were placed in the inner stage, as they would be, I presume, in order that they might be removed and the *prie-dieu* substituted for the next scene, and that the dumb-show was acted on the *upper*

¹ The "amazing coincidence" may be explained, I believe, by a liberal interpretation of Hamlet's much discussed "dozen or sixteen lines." That Shakespeare did not mean to imply by this a special passage, but some sort—*any* sort—of alteration which would account in the minds of the audience for the precise similarity, is now usually conceded; and a proof of it might be found in the fact that after mentioning *The Murder of Gonzago* Hamlet says, "I'll have these players Play *something like* the murder of my father." The Ghost's revelation enabled Hamlet to make "something like" into an "exact coincidence."

stage.¹ There would be perhaps a certain appropriateness in thus separating the dumb-show from the scene of the piece itself, its silent action taking place, as it were, in a world apart, remote, symbolical. And if this were indeed the arrangement, think how the dramatic value of the whole episode would be enhanced! Claudius composed and unsuspecting beside his Queen, with Hamlet and the others ranged before him watching, and over his very head the action taking place which was soon to be repeated before his eyes! The suspense which could be created by such a situation would be intense and would be sustained and increased as the piece itself was given.

Nevertheless, however appropriate in and of itself, and however excellent for its theatrical effectiveness, there is not the least warrant for presuming that it was actually so given. As the play was presented before the King, the dumb-show would not be placed where the King could not see it. There is no "above" in the stage direction; and in other dramas where a somewhat similar device occurs there is abundant evidence that it was not a traditional arrangement. In *Jocasta* and in *Gorboduc* it is expressly stated that the performers in the dumb-show entered "upon the stage." In *James IV*, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, those who were to witness a play were sent, as was Christopher Sly, to the "gallery"; but we have no record of any such use of the upper stage as I have suggested. I believe that the dumb-show and spoken piece alike were presented before Claudius, and that he did not look the other way to show the audience that he did not see what it was fully intended that he *should* see.²

What, then, of Claudius' calmness when his crime is first represented? How are we to get over this difficulty? My answer is simple: by not creating it. As we read the stage direction, it surely seems that Claudius would take alarm at the business of the dumb-show; but if we had none of us read or studied the drama, I doubt if our reaction during the brief moment when the dumb-show is being given would be more than an excited wonder as to whether

¹ Mr. Wilson assumes that the play within the play was performed on the inner stage, which corresponds in general position with the usual modern arrangement.

² It is a gratuitous assumption on Dr. Greg's part, and wholly unwarranted it seems to me, that the dumb-show was a surprise to Hamlet. He was familiar with the piece and was deeply concerned with its proper presentation. His comment, "Marry this is miching mallecho; it means mischief," indicates simply that *he* knows what is coming. He is not disconcerted, nor are his plans in the least upset.

the King would realize its import. We continue sure that *something* will happen when the piece itself is performed; but it is not to be expected that Claudius, as a well-conducted villain, will betray himself before the proper moment has arrived.

It is quite the custom for Shakespearean critics to scold at their adversaries for treating the characters in a drama as if they were actual people, and then to proceed to do the same thing themselves. Let me blandly follow the example of my betters and ask now: Why, considering Claudius as an actual murderer who witnesses the performance of his very crime, does he sit unmoved until the same action is repeated with the accompanying words?

Claudius, of course, is quite unprepared for any such exhibition. A group of strolling players has arrived at his castle, and he is delighted that Hamlet is inclined to see them perform a piece. He would naturally suppose that Hamlet was seeing it for the first time—as he himself was. If one will but glance again at the dialogue from the King's entrance to the appearance of the dumb-show, he will note that Hamlet has not yet begun to play the part of interpreter and "chorus." That these players should enact the very incident of his own crime might well impress Claudius (as it does Dr. Greg) as a strange coincidence, but there was no occasion for him to take alarm, nor would his "conscience" be instantly and violently shaken. The whole ear of Denmark had been rankly abused with a false report as to this unknown and unsuspected murder; to Claudius, who knew nothing of the Ghost's revelation, the pouring of poison into a sleeper's ear could have a special significance for no one but himself; so long as his crime was safely hidden, this momentary pantomime could arouse no suspicion regarding *him*.

It was not, so far as we know, the custom to have the action of the dumb-show repeated in the spoken piece; indeed, we have no other instance (I speak under correction) where just that is done. Ordinarily, preliminary or supplementary matters are the dumb-show's province. Wherever the argument is given, it is always spoken, as it was always in Latin comedy. There was no reason, therefore, why Claudius should inevitably take the dumb-show to be the argument, even though the action had thus far been repeated. Indeed, the purport of the dumb-show seems to have been none too apparent

to the other spectators. Ophelia guesses that "belike this show imports the argument of the play," but still hopes that the Prologue will tell them what it meant. One is reminded of the opening scene in Munday's *Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington*, where, immediately after the elaborate pantomime, Skelton says,

Sir John, once more bid your dumb-shows come in,
That, as they pass, I may explain them all.

When, therefore, Hamlet begins to manifest some knowledge of *The Murder of Gonzago*, it is quite natural that Claudius should ask him¹ if he has *heard* the argument, and if there is no offense in it. His question shows that Claudius does not even yet realize that the business of the dumb-show is to be completely worked out, and is only beginning to suspect Hamlet's connection with the "Mouse-trap." Immediately after this the action rushes to its climax. Hamlet reveals his complicity in the affair; the pouring of poison into the sleeper's ear is now re-enacted, with the open and explicit statement of the deed; and Hamlet adds, "You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife." At last Claudius fully realizes that his crime is known—that Hamlet himself knows it—and he retires in confusion and alarm.

The purpose of the dumb-show then is to do away with the spoken and too explicit argument and at the same time give the flavor of an old play acted by strolling players; and also perhaps to whet the curiosity of the audience as to the King's conduct when the play itself is presented. The mere action of the dumb-show, unsupported by any hint of Hamlet's connection with it, would not lead Claudius to any naïve self-betrayal, however increasingly uncomfortable he might grow during the whole procedure. At the start he had no reason to think of anything but a coincidence or to show any too obvious emotion. There is therefore no mystery to explain, and no reason to fancy either that Hamlet had been self-deceived (or Ghost-deceived) as to the exact manner of the murder, or that Claudius did not see the dumb-show when it was presented before him.

HENRY DAVID GRAY

LELAND STANFORD JUNIOR UNIVERSITY

¹ "Hamlet, of all people in the world!" exclaims Dr. Greg. But why not precisely Hamlet, who has just said as to the Player Queen's protestations, "O, but she'll keep her word"? That dénouement was still to be regarded, apparently, as possible.